

# **THE PROBLEMS OF CONTEMPORARY TOURISM IN RUSSIA: CONSIDERING MISTAKES OF THE SOVIET AND WESTERN EXPERIENCE**

by

**Kuznetcova Ekaterina**  
Nikitinskaya Street 10a, Flat 18,  
Samara, Russia  
E-mail: [katrin.kuznetcova@aiasec.net](mailto:katrin.kuznetcova@aiasec.net)

## **ABSTRACT**

The following article deals with the investigation of the main problems which arise in the sphere of tourism today as a result of the expansion of globalization processes, such as widening of transport networks, political changes, amplification of trans corporation influence and change of political status of some states. In the following article a short review and a conceptualization of tourist praxes of the Soviet citizens are given. Consideration of this very historical experience is extremely important for understanding of the problems of Russian tourism that occur nowadays. It is quite clear that the past experience is closely connected with the present development. Mobility of people (which in the Soviet Era was limited to the borders of the USSR), a state policy on the holiday organization (when opportunities for tourism were largely dependent on “political needs”), as well as financial capacity of citizens influence constant changes in the sphere of tourism. Therefore, with the change of political power there emerged new possibilities for realization of tourist practice and getting new holiday-making experience – people have acquired an opportunity to go abroad and to manage the process themselves. Extracts from interviews of modern tourists give an idea of changes in impressions in the course of gradual inclusion to the western pattern of tourism. This experience enables us to understand the expectations of further development in this sphere. Thus, it is possible to distinguish the topical directions of tourism in Russia: firstly, directions concerning standardization of impressions – the modern tourist is tired of the experience of both western and domestic tourism; secondly, the fear of instability of electronic systems of registration and on-line booking is still typical for the modern tourist; thirdly, high cost of domestic holidays – which are as a rule less beneficial than foreign ones; and finally changes in the image of vacation destinations in Russia. Consideration of these problems gives the chance to define the way to modernize tourist practices in the long run.

## **KEYWORDS**

Tourism, Russia, Impression, Modern Tourist

## **INTRODUCTION**

Nowadays tourism has become a powerful world industry which develops and changes rapidly under the influence of a great number of factors. To begin with, it certainly includes factors dealing with global uniting processes. The number of places for pilgrimage has grown enormously: more people have acquired the opportunities for traveling thanks to alteration and precipitation of vehicles. We can steadily claim that the sphere of tourism needs both a theoretical reconceptualization, as well as a search for new practical approaches [1]. For this purpose it is necessary to have a clear vision of the problems which tourism faces today. Undoubtedly, tourism in Russia is of our major concern in this article.

Taking into account Russian tourists and their traveling experience, it is possible to find certain similarities and distinctions in comparison with foreign travelers. It is certainly connected with peculiar history of our country. For a very long time the Soviet tourists could visit only in the countries within the boundaries of the Soviet Union. At that time the most widespread and prestigious way of tourism was health resort treatment. It played an important part in the social policy of the USSR. Thus tourist experience of Soviet people was unified; it almost violently lost an element of any uniqueness [2]. It was by far aimed at strengthening the processes of unity and evolvement of patriotic feelings. Nevertheless, it doesn't mean that a Soviet tourist was deprived of the opportunity to receive this unique experience. But ways of realization of strategy on acquisition collective experience ran counter to the state policy. Therefore tourism in the Soviet Union was in reality a constant balancing between a desire of exclusiveness and uniqueness and a formation of collective identity of a “Soviet citizen».

Significant changes in Russian tourist practice are commonly connected with the demolition of "The Iron Curtain". For tourists of that époque it meant discovering new world and unknown new places, learning new strategy of tourism, getting new "unbeaten" impressions. The problem of identity of the Soviet tourist was extremely acute: language, behavior, praxis of consumption – nearly everything distinguished the Soviet citizen from non-Soviet.

Thus, there was a gradual transformation of tourism within the bounds «from Soviet to Post-Soviet». These changes were connected with the development of mass production, reduction of the "working day" and increase of time for recreation, development of service sector, introduction of the guaranteed holiday time and a possibility to split it up. It resulted into the gradual loss of social orientation in favor of the commercial one. Tourism became a far more profitable business which needed a right direction and development. Special intermediary organizations strove to facilitate the process of the holiday organization. Subsequently travel agencies and tour operators began to define the duration of stay at various stops, provide tourists with the places of residence, excursion programs and food. All this contributed to the transformation of tourism into the industrial sphere.

In spite of the fact that tourism industrialization for Russia means moving away from the Soviet model (though the first steps towards this process were made in USSR), it does not imply that the problems specific to this type of tourism, were solved. Unfortunately, it is possible to speak only about a transformation of these problems.

One of the key points is a mentioned-above possibility of unique tourist experience. In the Soviet state it was almost impossible due to the unity- directed policy, i.e. for the socio political reasons, Post-Soviet tourism was unable to provide such recreation first and foremost for some economic reasons among which are: the need for minimization of expenses of tour agencies and tour operators, an urge to decrease expenses and a strong desire to turn tourist services into manufacture. It is possible to say that at that time tourism becomes a full-scale object of consumption which is essential for further development of the whole industry.

Another important point is that tourists ponder upon these changes either. Speaking about time when they started to go abroad they tend to estimate it positively: «Certainly, it was good to visit Anapa, for example, wasn't it? Or Tuapse ... but when me and my family for the first time visited Turkey, and then Egypt – Oh! It was amazing! Now, of course we are fed up with Antalya and the like... but can you imagine what it meant at that time? Judging only by a feeling of comfort it was like "apples and oranges"! Locals often don't understand your language, but try their best to make you feel comfortable», «Being a child it was great to spend time on the Russian coast – there you had both the sea and the native speech, you could run about with nothing to be afraid of ... But then it was no longer the same. Perhaps, it was me who had grown up or perhaps, everything around had changed. But when I got a chance to go abroad, I just could not to miss it».

However, the more opportunities to travel abroad Russian citizens had, the more they made use of it, and surprisingly the poorer impressions they got. It was born in that tourism had become the production of travelers' experience turned into manufacture. Of course this fact could not remain unnoticed by consumers: «We visited Rome, then in a year our friends went there and now when we look through our photos and share our memories – they are the same! Of course I understand that they couldn't build the new Coliseum, but has become boring». More often tourists discussing their trips say that they have become "the same common banal excursions". Such standardization of impressions is typical of a consumer society under the conditions of globalization [3].

For instance, J. Urry in the book «Consuming places» speculates upon the fact that people worldwide consume the same places for vacation. These places have become symbols of successful tourism [4]. Respectively, such popularity forces to work out a certain established mechanism of tourist practices.

He follows this idea in the article «Globalization and citizenship». He covers some problems which enable us to track influence of these processes on the sphere of tourism [5]. He speaks about globalization of strategies of multinational corporations, globalization of images, globalization of ideologies which are inherent in certain economic interests, globalization of political mobilization, and globalization of the networks which include transport, documentation, etc.

Thus, it becomes clear, how tourism is being built in this system of world globalization. Besides, obvious advantages (the most important of which for travel agencies is the possibility of a constant and stable capital growth), it is necessary to realize that such customary way of tourism needs an alternative. First of all, there is a need of a competing approach for the development of tourism in our country.

This conclusion can be drawn from a comparison made by tourists when they speak about the development of this sphere in Russia: «Well what should we do? The situation seems to be the same, but the quality is worse», "Why

should I waste my holiday and go to some place in Russia whereas I am sure I will be buttered up in Egypt, or even in Portugal ... in order to hear Russian speech more often? It sounds foolish», «Although they have begun to use the same enticing offers, but in practice the offers are far from being tempting».

Hence we can distinguish the following problems of consumers in the sphere of the Russian tourism:

1. On the one hand, it is the above noted standardization of impressions. The alignment in the creation of these impressions with the western pattern is obvious. At the same time, on the other hand, in Russia there is a number of unique, genuine holiday destinations which do not get enough support (mainly financial), as the majority of "western" resorts. Therefore Russian leisure areas need reassessment with a shift of emphasis on unconventional recreation areas.
1. Another current problem of tourism in Russia is its high cost. Many tourists admit that « flying to Egypt is cheaper, than going to our native seaside». Thus they also mention additional inevitable expenditures typical for a trip in Russia. Certainly, the financial question for tourists is a defining one since they make their choice on the assumption of their expenses.
2. Another confusing problem is the development of on-line booking. On the one hand, it is a very convenient way for planning a holiday as a traveler does not have to turn to intermediaries. On the other hand in this situation the responsibility system is brought into focus – How to complain in case of infraction of obligations from one of the parties? How to compensate unplanned expenditures? Certainly, it concerns not only the Russian tourism, but it is necessary to note that in Russia a level of mistrust to such systems is rather high. Respectively, apart from adjustment of the system of booking and reservation, it is simply necessary to raise the general level of consumers' literacy.
3. Creation of new image of holiday destinations in Russia is worth mentioning as well. In addition to the fact that present development of advertising in tourism is guided by the western experience, Russian travel agencies and tour operators still underestimate potency and the importance of interactive communication. Professional advertising agents can influence behavior of consumers through creation of the fantasy worlds or myths round tourist places. Thus virtual communication should strengthen and direct an effect of the real one.

By all means, we have described the general tendency in the sphere of the Russian tourism although the problems may vary from region to region. It is necessary to pay attention to a possibility of receiving unique tourist experience in each separate place. Moreover, it is important to consider both history of each region and all communication media which can affect attraction of new consumers. Tourists as well need to feel financial safety during their vacation irrespectively of they the way organized their holiday – whether they did it themselves or with the help of intermediaries.

To put everything into a nut shell, we should stress the fact that tourism development and its problems are always closely connected with history of the country. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account characteristic aspects of development of tourism in the Soviet state. Thirst for new impressions caused by unexpected comfort of foreign resorts nudged Russians to consume this new, unavailable earlier type of tourism. However, the standardized set of provided impressions brings tourists more disappointment than pleasure. This fact determines not only revision of strategies inherited from western tour agencies but it makes us look at the sphere of tourism at a quite different angle.

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## APPENDIX

Actuality of the research: political changes, acceleration of globalization processes, changes of mobility of people, orientation to continuous consumption – all these factors affect each sphere of public life, including tourism. Tourist practices besides being recreation facilities for common citizens can serve different purposes. These purposes define perception of the tourism in the opinion of vacationers.

Purpose of the research: to study the change of perception of Russian tourist practices by Russian tourists (comparing the Soviet - Post-Soviet — and modern tourist practices).

Aims of the Research:

1. To get the idea of tourism during the Soviet years (during the period called "The Iron Curtain")
2. To get an insight into tourism after the fall of "The Iron Curtain".
3. To study tourist practices at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
4. To look into contemporary tourist practices (during the Noughties: 2000-2009)
5. To trace a tendency of changes in perception of tourist practices by tourists.

Methods used in the research: Half-formalized interview.

Sampling: purposive

Guide interview:

1. How did you spend your vacation till the end of the 1980s? Where did you go? Who was financially responsible for this travel?
2. How did you spend your vacation during the period since the end of the 80s to the USSR break up? Did you have an opportunity to go abroad?
3. How did you spend your vacation after the change of political power until 2000? What holiday destinations could you afford at the time?
4. How do you spend your vacation today?
5. Do you see any principal changes in the way of spending holidays comparing the Soviet and the Post-Soviet periods?

Analysis of the Received Data.

Undoubtedly, Russian tourist practices (Soviet citizens in the past) underwent global changes in the last 30 years. First of all, they are certainly connected with a change of political status of our country, with a number of possibilities provided by the Soviet Union and later a variety of both Russian and foreign travel agencies and tour operators.

Before the fall of "The Iron Curtain" the USSR policy assumed entire control of recreation which the Soviet people could afford. Allocation and rewarding with travel vouchers to sanatorium, organization of summer camps for children and labor teams for students. We cannot but mention such option as "wild" camping, but it was much more prestigious to receive a voucher for a health resort. I remember that once Mother came and said that we were going to Truskavets – there was mineral water which could cure her back. Her plant awarded her with that voucher. We went there several times ... ". "We regarded labor teams as a recreation facility. We dug carrots in the afternoon and had fun in the evening, singing and dancing to the guitar. The luckiest students were sent to collect cherry. It was a bit earlier, in June or July ...». We should take into account that USSR was shielded with "The Iron Curtain", hence all tourist practices took place only on the territory of the Soviet state. Thus, it is obvious that in the Soviet years recreation for students or pupils of the senior classes was bound up with labor. Furthermore, vacation planning and organization was submitted to the state needs and resources.

This situation slightly changed with the collapse of the USSR and with the demolition of "The Iron Curtain". These political events gave citizens a chance to go abroad for educational or business purposes. Although it can be hardly called "a rest", but it was the first experience of international tourism for a certain part of the population for sure. With the establishment of the Russian Federation the state was no longer able to interfere with vacation and recreation planning and consequently with tourist practices of Russian people. On the whole, it would be right to say that meddling into citizens' affairs was limited to tax collecting, forging relationships with other countries (reinforcement and weakening of a visa regime) and control of activity of tourist intermediaries – travel agencies and tour operators. Therefore, people began to travel abroad in large numbers on business trips or to study abroad. It became an absolute advantage for tourists who could gain new experience and unique impressions. It also presupposed that the country did

not have to spend so many resources on the development and support of leisure areas. As a result Russian resorts failed to earn their keep as the flow of tourists essentially decreased.

Of course, it was great to spend holidays in Anapa, for example, wasn't it? Or in Tuapse ... but when me and my family left for the first time to Turkey, and then to Egypt –Oh, it was an amazing experience! Now, of course, we are fed up with Antalya and the like ... but can you imagine what it meant at that time? - Russian citizens were longing for the change of holiday destinations and having received this opportunity very few people were eager to neglect it.

However, any desire for new impressions has a saturation limit. Planning and organization of vacation is not an exception– development of the tourism industry (emergence of the new agencies and new resorts), unfortunately, does not always lead to the development and qualitative changes in the vacation program such as excursions, facilities for tourism, change of scenery and so on. The fact is that these opportunities also depend on the welfare of tourists. If we examine programs offered by travel agencies, it is clear that vacationers have nevertheless quite a limited choice of potential impressions.

Today tourists go to the same Egypt, Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Portugal, etc. Over and over again they come to the conclusion that if they do not take care of their vacation themselves – i.e. do not look for accommodation (hotels, hostels or apartments for rent), do not work out the route, their vacation will result into a manufactured routine: «We visited Rome, our friends went there in a year, and now when we look through our photos and share our memories – they are the same! Of course I understand that they couldn't build the new Coliseum, but it has become boring».

Of course, the USSR tourists had an opportunity to travel within the borders of the union, so tourists were unable to tell whether their holiday was as diverse as they wanted it to be. Today in comparison with the Soviet years it is possible to increase a range of tourist experience. However, in early Post-Soviet years this experience was something unique and genuine while today it turns out to be mundane.

Tourists need a way to diversify their vacation that is why they more often tend to organize it themselves. Hence if travel agencies refuse to acknowledge the changes in perception of vacation by tourists, a gradual decline of the tourist industry would set in soon. Undoubtedly, this question needs a more thorough studying.